DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 840 PS 021 292

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TITLE Promoting Epistemological Development and Parenting Skills of Rural, Impoverished Mothers.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (New Orleans, LA, March 25-28, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; Consciousness Raising; Dialogs (Language); Epistemology; *Group Discussion; Individual Development; Interpersonal Communication; *Mothers; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Education; Parenting Skills; *Peer Groups; Poverty; Rural Areas; *Self Concept; Young Children

ABSTRACT

The Listening Partners project examined rural mothers' development of a sense of the power of their own minds and voices and the relationship between this sense of power and mothers' parenting strategies and their children's development. Two cohorts of 60 women from a rural, impoverished region of Vermont participated in the program. Half the women in each cohort were involved in small weekly discussion groups that focused on promoting opportunities and skills for high-quality, reflective peer dialogue. Women's group activities included sharing responses to questions; keeping journals on audiotape; transcribing and editing group discussions; interviewing; telling stories about their own and their children's growth; collaborative problem solving; and publishing. Preceding and following the series of group meetings, and again 9 months later, the women completed the Ways of Knowing assessment of epistemological position. In addition, the mothers completed other assessments of parent-child communication beliefs, self-esteem, and social support; children completed assessments of problem solving and preschool competence; and mothers and children were videotaped during interactions at home. Results indicated that mothers with complex epistemological perspectives endorsed more cognitively demanding, nonauthoritarian, and nondirective parenting strategies than mothers with simple epistemological perspectives. The group meetings proved especially useful for women who entered the program with simple epistemological perspectives. (AC)

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ED357840

# Promoting Epistemological Development and Parenting Skills of Rural, Impoverished Mothers

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Poster presented at the Society for Research in Child Development
March 25-28, 1993, New Orleans

This research was funded by a grant to Lynne Bond and Mary Field Belenky from the Bureau of Maternal and Child Health (MCJ-500541) 10/86-6/91; and through support from the A.L. Mailman Family Foundation, and the Charles and Els Bendheim Foundation.

Many impoverished, isolated, rural mothers report having been raised in socially isolated, hierarchically structured, and relatively nonverbal households with little opportunity to develop a sense of power of their own minds and voices. With little reliance on their minds or words for problem-solving and communication, these women are more likely to turn to power-oriented, authoritarian techniques for influencing their own children (much as their parents did with them). Such parenting strategies provide little opportunity to appreciate and nurture their children's (and their own) social and cognitive capacities. In turn, the children are left with many of the thinking and parenting strategies of their parents, thus perpetuating these patterns through subsequent generations.

The Listening Partners (LP) project examined the epistemological development of rural, isolated mothers of young children and the relationship between maternal epistemology, parenting strategies and children's development. In addition, LP implemented and evaluated an 8-month preventive/promotive intervention designed to ameliorate the experience of social isolation and hierarchy to support the development of poor, rural, isolated mothers so that they might better sponsor the development of their children, their peers, and themselves.

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Table 1 summarizes the relations we imagine between epistemological perspectives and parent-child relationships. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) scheme of epistemological development guides this vision as well as our notion of the kinds of steps that might lead an individual to gain a voice, to claim the power of her mind more fully, and to become more actively engaged in conceptualizing and interacting with her children in ways that promote their cognitive development and sense of self competence. Figure 1 provides a schematic diagram of the program components and hypothesized relationships.

## Research Objectives

(1) To examine the interrelationships among: (a) mothers' intellectual reasoning, (b) maternal self concept, (c) maternal self esteem, (d) mothers' parent communication strategies and conceptualizations of the child, (e) mothers' social support networks, (f) mother-child interaction, (g) children's perceived competence and (h) children's interpersonal cognitive problem solving skills.

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While there are substantial theoretical bases for linking these components with one another, relevant empirical evidence is limited. Further demonstration and clarification of the interrelatedness of these characteristics can contribute toward: (a) fuller understanding of the nature and functioning of each, (b) improved design and selection of program evaluation and developmental assessment tools, and (c) development of more effective promotive and preventive intervention strategies.

(2) To gather systematic data on poor rural mothers and their interactions with their young children. Limited systematic data on the psychological development and parent-child interactions of this population are available, the vast majority of the research having focused on urban and suburban populations.

(3) To develop a cost-effective promotive intervention for mothers and young children that is particularly sensitive, both on psychological and practical grounds to the needs of the rural poor.

(4) To determine the effects of this Listening Partners intervention on: (a) the development of mothers' intellectual reasoning, (b) maternal self concept and self esteem, (c) parent communication strategies and conceptualizations of the child, (d) maternal social support networks, (e) mother-child interaction, and in turn, on (f) children's perceived competence and interpersonal cognitive problem solving skills.

## Method

Participants. Two cohorts of 60 women (N=120) from a rural, impoverished sparsely populated region of Vermont participated in the program. Participants were all: 17-34 years of age with at least one child under 7 years of age; living below poverty in social/rural isolation with no involvement in support or self help groups; and identified by one or more referring agencies as having little family support and as being at risk for abuse or neglect of the children or under unusual stress.

Assessments. Preceding and following the intervention (at approximately a 9-month interval) and again, 9 months following the conclusion of the intervention (followup), the women engaged in a series of primarily interview assessments that included: a self description, the Ways of Knowing assessment of epistemological position (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986), the Parent-Child Communication Beliefs Interview (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, Johnson, Sigel & Epstein, 1980), the Rosenberg (1979) Self Esteem Inventory, and the Family Social Support Scale (Dunst, Jenkins & Trivette, 1984).

In addition, each mother and her child (the child under 7 years and closest to 4 years) were videotaped at home interacting during: (a) a 10 minute free-play session, (b) two 5-minute semi-structured teaching tasks, and (c) a 5-minute clean-up period. The children completed the Preschool Interpersonal Problem Solving Test (PIPS; Shure & Spivack, 1974) and Harter and Pike's (1980) Pictorial Preschool Competence Scale.

Intervention. Half of the women in each cohort (n=60) were involved in small, weekly discussion groups of 10-12 women (including 2 group facilitators--project staff) over an eight-month period. In the course of these weekly gatherings, the groups focused upon promoting opportunities and skills for high-quality, reflective peer dialogue. Table 2 summarizes the intervention activities used to sponsor reflective dialogue. Emphasis was placed upon extending this dialogue to use in the family, and especially with children, as well.

Focus on Dialogue. Dialogue was chosen as the basic tool for the multiple phases of the project including: 1) the recruitment of the rural, isolated, impoverished participants, 2) the 8-month weekly group preventive/promotive intervention, 3) individual and program assessments. Through dialogue people can discover and cultivate the power of their minds and voices as well as their abilities to act as midwives on behalf of the intellectual development of children and peers; e.g., participating in dialogue provides opportunities to gain comfort with listening and speaking--finding meaning in others' words, finding words to articulate one's own meaning, seeing that trading stories and ideas can be useful. Dialogue can help one develop an awareness of the interpretative and creative powers of the mind--one's own as well as others'. Only after achieving a clear understanding that ideas can and do emerge from one's own mind can a person begin to consciously develop, use, articulate, and integrate procedures for constructing and refining ideas--whether the procedures are lodged in discourse that is critical and abstract or in discourse that is collaborative and narrative.

The use of intensive dialogue to introduce the program to potential participants as well as to assess participants and the program over time proved unusually powerful and informative for the program participants as well as for the program design and evaluation. The use of dialogue was further developed for the intervention around several key activities (see appended examples). Re-presenting the women's own words through audiotaped recordings, transcriptions, and dissemination of their words, ideas, and stories, helped the women experience being deeply heard by others as well as listen to their own thoughts as they emerged. Sharing their own and their children's "life stories" and "growth stories"--tales of aspiration and realization, however small--encouraged women to recognize accomplishments, growth, and strengths that more typically go unnoticed. Group exercises in dialogue as a basis for interpersonal cognitive problem-solving (elaborating upon the work of Shure & Spivack, 1978; 1979) highlighted and fostered the women's abilities to think and work through problems and to support one another and one's children in the process of collaborative problem-solving. Interviewing in pairs and as a group helped women to discover their skills in identifying meaningful questions and drawing out the ideas of others; these abilities are instrumental in developing and sustaining a sense of voice and mind in oneself and in others.

As Figure 1 describes, we imagine that high quality reflective dialogue both reflects and promotes the epistemological development of those involved. Not only will it lead to more complex and constructive conceptions of and interactions with peers and children, but this process is self-sustaining

because it provides a context in which the powers of mind and voice--and the powers of dialogue--become both real and apparent to the participants, encouraging and sustaining their use and their effects.

Major Results. (See Bond, Belenky, & Weinstock, 1991, for greater detail.) Interrater and test-retest reliabilities ranged from .80 to .95 for the various measures. Data was coded and analyzed through multiple statistical and descriptive means to address the research questions.

Preintervention. ANOVAs and MANOVAs on the relationships between maternal epistemological development and parenting strategies and parent-child interaction confirmed the theoretical assumptions underlying the project design. Mothers with more complex epistemological perspectives endorsed more cognitively demanding and non-authoritarian, and non-directive parenting communication strategies--those that are more likely to draw children into active participation and problem-solving (e.g., Tables 3 and 4). Moreover, women with more complex epistemological perspectives used more cognitively engaging statements and questions with their children and focused less upon controlling and/or restraining their children's non-task related behaviors. Similarly, women who endorsed more non-authoritarian parent-child communication strategies used more cognitively engaging statements and questions with their children during parent-child interaction sessions.

Post-intervention and followup. The intervention proved to be especially successful for women who entered the program with simpler epistemological perspectives. Intervention participants who entered the program with less complex epistemologies showed significantly greater epistemological gains than did comparable controls (see Figure 2). These gains not only persisted but, in large part, even increased during the 9-month period following the termination of the intervention. Multiple Regression Analyses revealed that among the intervention participants, epistemological position at project entry significantly predicted epistemological gains over the 18 month study period; those who began the intervention with the least complex epistemologies showed the most gain.

## Conclusions

Certain efforts aimed at fostering child development must place more emphasis upon facilitating the development of parents and other caregivers. Because only enduring influences have enduring effects, the child's ongoing environment is most able to support transactions that will foster or impede development.

As we focus upon supporting more effective parenting, it becomes increasingly clear that women's abilities to employ more effective parenting strategies may well depend upon the women's own developmental levels and perspectives. Because mothering strategies do appear linked, in part, to maternal cognitive and social development and understanding, interventions might best focus directly upon these characteristics as the foundation for more effective parenting activities as well as happier healthier adults. That is, we must consider a parent's developmental readiness to deal with new issues and concepts much as we do children's developmental readiness when we

design child-oriented interventions. As the Listening Partners model suggests, this approach may foster the development of not only healthier and strong individuals, but also peer, parent-child, and community systems that themselves serve as self-sustaining promotive interventions. Without such a focus, we may continue to see more child and parent training programs that fail to demonstrate long-lasting effects.

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TABLE 1. Epistemological Perspectives of Self and Relations With Peers and Children

| | *Mother's View of Her Mind and Voice* | *Mother's View of Her Peer Relationships* | *Mother's View of Child's Mind and Voice* | *Mother's View of Child Rearing* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Silent knower | Feels stupid, deaf, and mute; feels she can't teach others; words are weapons | Can't learn from peer dialogue; fear of betrayal; remains distant and guarded | Child as deaf and mute; child can't learn; child's feelings are dangerous, not understood | Use raw power to keep child in line; neither listen nor explain; much yelling |
| Received knower | Goal is to receive, store, and transmit without modifying information; learns through memorization and recitation | Emphasize giving help and advice; listen to others' expertise; judge right and wrong of others' ideas and behaviors | Child learns by listening to elders; should be seen but not heard; child's feelings are okay but not important | Inform child through lectures; teach right and wrong using rules, rewards, and punishments; emphasis on modeling |
| Subjective knower | Discover inner voice; truth comes from inner voice and experience, not authorities; values individuality | Enjoys exchanging stories; nonjudgmental, accepting of differences; experience seen as personal, not generalizable | Child has own inner voice; each child is unique; delight in child's spontaneity | Let child think and speak for her/himself; laissez-fair; nonjudgmental |
| Procedural knower | Goal is to articulate thoughts and feelings; uses procedures to evaluate and guide thinking | Value sharing and understanding one another's views; help each other articulate and support own perspectives; help each other learn best procedures | Child has thoughts and feelings to be developed; child can learn procedures for finding good answers | Ask for and provide reasoning and explanations; share processes behind each other's thinking |
| Constructed knower | Can collaborate in construction of knowledge through dialogue with self and others; create new synthesis: not merely uncover information | Relationship is greater than the sum of its parts; ask lots of questions; challenge; draw out one another's best thinking; collaborate to share, evaluate, and create new synthesis | Child has ability and responsibility to think through and make choices; can and should listen to heart and mind of self and others; inventor; little scientist | Draw out child's thoughts and feelings; ask questions and provide feedback; take and evaluate each other's perspectives; share and talk through views, challenge, plan |

Table 2

## ACTIVITIES OF LISTENING PARTNERS

## AIMED AT SPONSORING REFLECTIVE PEER DIALOGUE

### A. Round Robins

- group members shared their responses to a question or sentence stem that encouraged attention to participants' accomplishments, intelligence, and themselves as thinkers; the activity also helped to encourage everyone to share a few of their thoughts and to listen to each other

### B. Talking Journals

- each woman was given a tape recorder so she could keep an audio-taped journal for herself or listen to taped group discussions; the recorders helped to capture the women's words so that they could hear themselves thinking

### C. Recording Discussions on Newsprint

- the process of recording ideas generated in group discussions onto newsprint posted on the walls helped to slow the conversation and provide time for reflection; it also helped everyone to become comfortable with silences, and to <u>see</u> their ideas grow and develop

### D. Transcribing, Editing, and Re-visiting Group Discussions

- transcripts from previous group sessions were read aloud to highlight the extent of the women's thoughtfulness; editing helped to focus us on participants' best thinking; comparing edited versions with the originals encouraged the women to assess our interpretations and to continue revising their text until it adequately reflected their thoughts

### E. Interviewing

- women worked in pairs or groups to draw out each other's voices and thoughts by asking good questions; the process of interviewing -- as interviewee and interviewer -- encourages self-reflection and attention to the roles of speaker and listener

## F. Women's Growth Stories

- we worked hard at drawing out, transcribing and circulating participants' personal stories of aspiration and realization, that is, growth stories; we chose to attend to the growing edge and to strengths rather than mistakes or deficiencies; final drafts were distributed to everyone in the group

## G. Children's Growth Stories

- we also looked for and transcribed the stories the mothers told about their own children's growth and achievement, and asked them to observe and record their children's accomplishments and successes; we hoped to encourage everyone to become even more conscious of each child's "growing edge"

## H. Problem-Solving

- we sought to teach interviewing techniques that would promote collaborative problem-solving through (a) defining and posing the problem, (b) idea-gathering as many different possible solutions, (c) considering the consequences of each choice, and (d) resolution and action; we also focused on how the women could use these strategies to support their children in talking and thinking through the problems they faced

## I. Publishing

- we worked to find audiences for the women's stories so that those with similar experiences could learn from each other and the larger public could learn about living in poverty and rural isolation; we also saw finding an audience as an empowering experience, forcing the author to see herself and the problems she was struggling with from a broadened perspective

Table 3a. Mean Parent-Child Communication Strategy Scores as a Function of Primary Epistemological Position: Scores can range from 0-8 (N=112).

| Primary Epistemological Position | Parent-Child Communication Strategy | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Authoritarian | Direct Authoritative | Parent Activity | Rational Authoritative | Child Activity | Distancing |
| 1 (n=15) | 3.0 | .8 | 1.5 | 1.3 | --- | .1 |
| 1/2 (n=4) | 3.6 | 1.6 | 1.1 | .9 | .5 | --- |
| 2 (n=70) | 2.5 | .6 | 1.9 | 1.1 | .5 | .1 |
| 2/3 (n=7) | 2.2 | .2 | 2.0 | 1.4 | .5 | .7 |
| 3 (n=16) | 1.8 | .7 | 2.0 | .8 | .7 | .3 |

Note. Totals may not add up to 8 due to rounding error and the fact that not all possible communication strategies are included here. There were no women in the sample coded with epistemological scores greater than the primary position of 3 (Subjective Knowing).

Table 3b. Mean Parent-Child Communication Strategy Scores as a Function of Epistemological Group: Scores can range from 0-8 (N=112).

| Epistemological Group | Parent-Child Communication Strategy | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Authoritarian | Direct Authoritative | Parent Activity | Rational Authoritative | Child Activity | Distancing |
| Any Silence (n=25) | 3.1 | .9 | 1.4 | 1.3 | .2 | .1 |
| Full Received (n=42) | 2.5 | .6 | 1.9 | 1.1 | .4 | .1 |
| Any Subjective (n=45) | 2.2 | .5 | 2.1 | 1.0 | .5 | .3 |

Note. Totals may not add up to 8 due to rounding error and the fact that not all possible communication strategies are included here. There were no women in the sample coded with epistemological scores greater than the primary position of 3 (Subjective Knowing).

Table 4a. Modal Parent-Child Communication Strategy as a function of Primary Epistemological Position (N=81).

| Primary Epistemological Position | Parent-Child Communication Strategy | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Authoritarian | Direct Authoritative | Parent Activity | Rational Authoritative | Distancing |
| 1 (n=11) | 82% | 9% | 9% | --- | --- |
| 1/2 (n=3) | 100% | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 2 (n=51) | 49% | 4% | 29% | 10% | 4% |
| 2/3 (n=5) | 20% | --- | 20% | 20% | 20% |
| 3 (n=11) | 27% | 9% | 36% | 9% | --- |

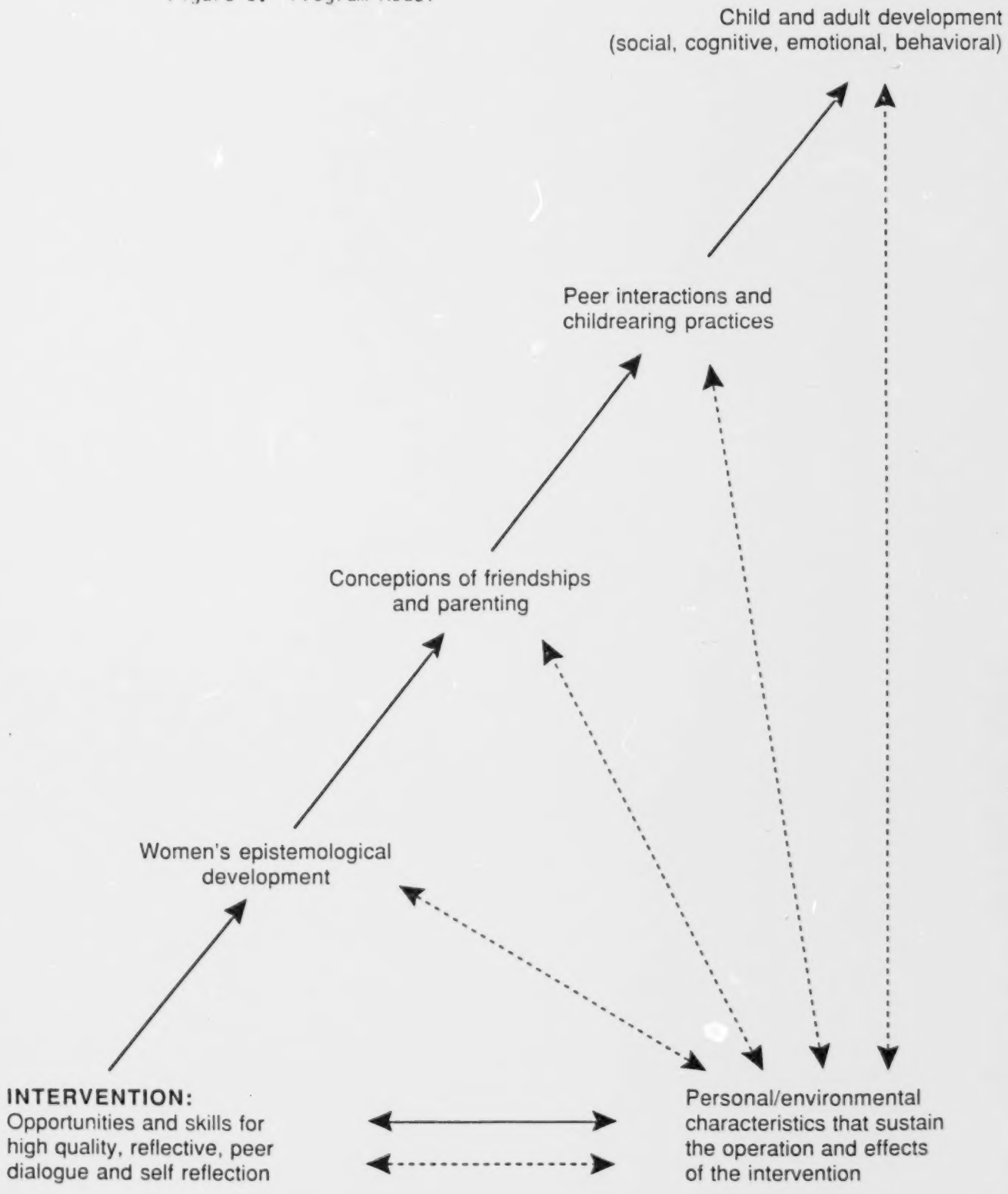
Note. Percents may not add up to 100 due to rounding error and the fact that not all possible communication strategies are included here. There were no women in the sample coded with epistemological scores greater than the primary position of 3 (Subjective Knowing).

Table 4b. Modal Parent-Child Communication Strategy as a function of Epistemological Group (N=81).

| Epistemological Group | Parent-Child Communication Strategy | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Authoritarian | Direct Authoritative | Parent Activity | Rational Authoritative | Distancing |
| Any Silence (n=19) | 79% | 5% | 5% | 5% | --- |
| Full Received (n=30) | 47% | 7% | 33% | 10% | 3% |
| Any Subjective (n=32) | 38% | 3% | 31% | 9% | 6% |

Note. Percents may not add up to 100 due to rounding error and the fact that not all possible communication strategies are included here. There were no women in the sample who were coded with epistemological scores greater than the primary position of 3 (Subjective Knowing).

Figure 1. Program Model



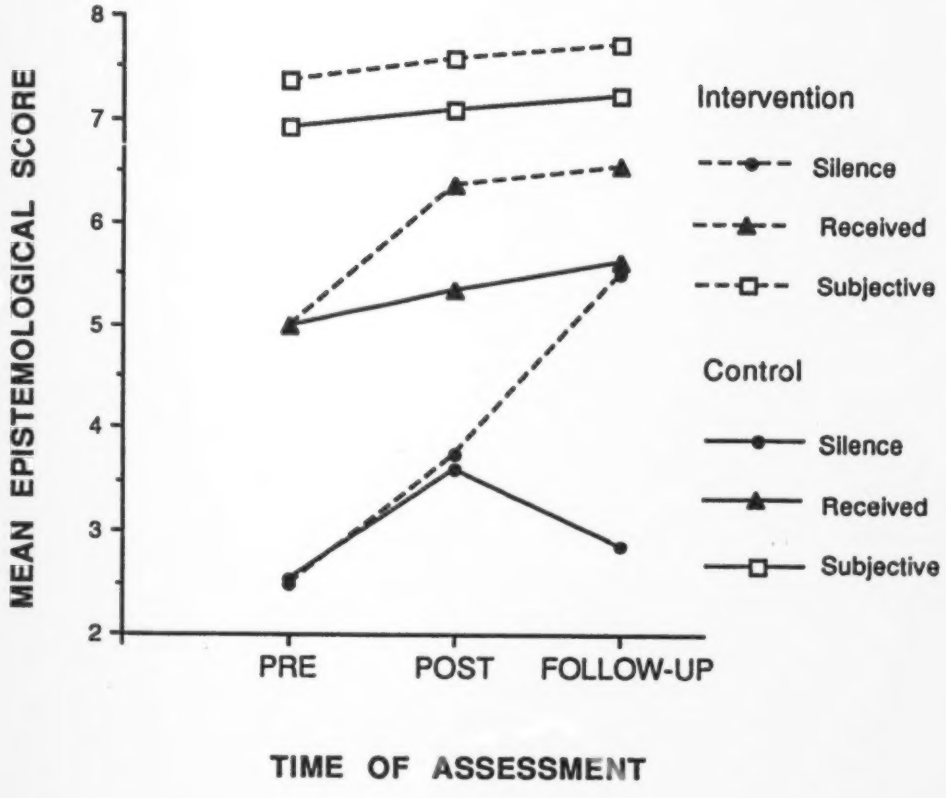



Figure 2. Change in epistemological perspective as a function of intervention and original epistemological perspective